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ABSTRACT

Emotional child abuse is virtually inevitable in the context of the traditional nuclear family and often has a more detrimental effect on children than other, more widely publicized forms of maltreatment. Clinical, statistical, and empirical evidence shows that normative child-rearing practices in Western culture have pathogenic properties and effects. Parental abuse in the traditional nuclear family often results in the personal suffering, limitation, and maladjustment of children. Manifestations of this abuse include: (1) behavior based on parental hostility such as verbal abuse, sadistic socialization, and lack of respect for a child's boundaries, spontaneity, and individuality; (2) destructive practices including permissiveness and inconsistency; (3) overly restrictive or harsh moral codes; and (4) defenses and addictive patterns which tend to transmit from parents to children. A number of factors are involved in the psychodynamics of emotional maltreatment: (1) parents' ambivalent feelings toward themselves and their children; (2) their projection of their negative traits onto their children; (3) a confusion of emotional hunger with love; (4) the exclusivity of traditional couplings; and (5) the utilization of the child as a symbol of immortality. The more parents were deprived or abused during their formative years, the greater the impairment of their parental functions. The nuclear family is not inherently detrimental to human mental health, but it has evolved into a destructive institution. Only by dealing with the issues that make families dysfunctional can family life be made more supportive and constructive for children. (Contains 118 references.) (CC)

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THE UNIVERSALITY OF EMOTIONAL CHILD ABUSE

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Emotional child abuse is virtually inevitable in the context of the traditional nuclear family and often has a more detrimental effect on children than other, more widely publicized forms of maltreatment. This paper documents clinical, statistical, and empirical evidence showing that *normative* child-rearing practices in our culture have pathogenic properties and effects. Manifestations of emotional child abuse include: (1) behaviors based on parental hostility such as verbal abuse, sadistic socialization measures, lack of respect for the child's personal boundaries, threat of abandonment, and stifling a child's spontaneity; (2) destructive practices based on indifference and neglect, including excessive permissiveness and inconsistency; (3) behaviors based on ignorance, including dishonest role-playing, overprotection, and isolation; (4) overly restrictive or harsh moral codes; and (5) parents' defenses and addictive patterns that are transmitted to their children.

A number of factors are involved in the psychodynamics of emotional maltreatment: parents' ambivalent feelings, the projection of parents' negative traits onto children, the confusion between emotional hunger and genuine love, the exclusivity of traditional coupling, and the utilization of the child as a symbol of immortality. It is mandatory that we examine dehumanizing child-rearing practices delineated here in order to help future generations of children.

INTRODUCTION

> A disease that is kept hidden behind closed doors and shuttered windows, whose existence is ignored or denied, can never be cured.... At that time, we had no statistics; we only had our gut reactions to personal experiences. It was difficult for those of us who believed child maltreatment to be a major disease to convince those who did not.
>
> Vincent Fontana (1983, p. 30-31)

> To be able to see anybody as abusive, I had to acknowledge that the woman who gave me life also devalued it, demeaned it and nearly destroyed it.
>
> Barbara Dolan (1991, p. 47)

Recent studies have shown that physical and sexual abuse of children is far more widespread than was previously recognized.[1] However, emotional or psychological child abuse very often has a more profound impact on the child than either physical or sexual maltreatment in terms of its overall effect on

1 The prevalence of physical and sexual abuse is supported by numerous statistical studies, including a National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse survey (National Center on Child Abuse Prevention Research, 1990) that showed 2.4 million children and youth abused in the United States in 1989, and a 1979 estimate (Sarafino, 1979) that found as many as 336,000 victims of sexual abuse each year. In another national survey, 27% of the women and 16% of the men surveyed reported being sexually abused (Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis, & Smith, 1990). "Surveys in California and Massachusetts in the 1980s found that as many as 1 in 5 girls and 1 in 7 boys under the age of 18 had been sexually abused by a relative" (Gorman, 1991, p. 46).

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the psyche, the spirit, and the humanness of the individual. Although abuses that lead to bodily injury are reprehensible and tragic, nonetheless, insufficient attention has been paid to other patterns of abuse.

Emotional child abuse refers to the damage to the child's psychological development and emerging personal identity, primarily caused by parents' (primary caretakers') immaturity, defended life-style, and conscious or unconscious aggression toward the child. We must consider it an abuse when imprinting from early interactions with parents has long-term debilitating effects on a person's conception of self, impairs personal relationships, leads to a condition of general unhappiness, causes pain in one's sexual life, and interferes with and stifles development of career and vocational pursuits.[2] Although personal deficiencies and limitations in adult functioning are at times a function of biological or hereditary factors, in our experience, they generally have been more closely related to, even over-determined by, abuses suffered in the process of growing up.

Empirical research and our own clinical studies have led us to conclude that *normative* child-rearing practices in our society have pathogenic properties and effects.[3] In commenting on the increasing normalization of psychopathology in the Western world, R. D. Laing (1990) stated: "Pathology has, or has almost, taken over, and has become the norm, the standard that sets the tone for the society...[we] live in" (p. xi). Physical, sexual, and emotional abuses suffered by children in the course of a so-called *normal* upbringing are far more common and the effects are far more destructive and long-lasting than most people recognize (Blumberg, 1974; Emerson & McBride, 1986; Finkel, 1987; Ferenczi, 1933/1955; Garbarino, Guttmann, & Seeley, 1986; Jones, 1982; Miller, 1979/1981, 1980/1984, 1981/1984; Shearer & Herbert, 1987; Shengold, 1989; Zigler, 1980). Indeed, no child enters adulthood without incurring a certain amount of damage in basic areas of personality development that disturb psychological functioning and yet leave no visible scars.

Although emotional child abuse is omnipresent within the context of the traditional nuclear family,[4] the degree to which children are damaged varies considerably. The more parents were deprived, rejected, or misunderstood during *their* formative years, the greater the impairment of their parental functions, regardless of their stated commitment or concern for their children. It is important to emphasize that many of the behaviors that hurt children occur on the periphery of parents' consciousness. There are many reasons why parents are seemingly insensitive or oblivious to the ways they damage their children; however, two reasons are relevant to the present discussion: (1) most parents have forgotten or rationalized their own parents' mistreatment of *them*; and (2) most are insensitive to *themselves*, relating to, mistreating, and punishing themselves in much the same style that they were treated as children. In other words, negative attitudes toward oneself are extended to one's children and perpetuate the cycle of abuse.

The reason child abuse of *all* forms has been minimized or denied in our society[5] is that it is a basic part of a core defense to maintain an idealized image of parents and family members. Children prefer to fantasize that parents are "good" and that they them-

2 In stressing the profound negative effects of emotional or psychological abuse, Garbarino, Guttmann, and Seeley (1986) state: "Rather than casting psychological maltreatment as an ancillary issue, subordinate to other forms of abuse and neglect, we should place it as the centerpiece of efforts to understand family functioning and to protect children. In almost all cases, it is the psychological consequences of an act that define that act as abusive" (p. 7).

3 A national survey of disciplinary practices reported that 97% of all children in the United States have been physically punished. The borderline abuse group, defined as those parents who administered daily or weekly spankings, were more reflective of a cultural norm than a parenting deviation (Kaufman & Zigler, 1987).

4 Clinical observation utilizing a feeling release therapy supported the hypothesis regarding the universality of childhood trauma (Firestone, 1985). In a population of over 200 individuals, we found that, without exception, every subject expressed deep-seated pain that he\she had previously suppressed. We agree with Janov (1970) that people arrange their lives to avoid the recurrence of painful feelings of sadness associated with early trauma.

5 The incidence of child maltreatment has been underestimated in our society; nonetheless, the effects of abuse are visible early on as evidenced by the fact that over 20% of school-age children exhibit some form of serious (diagnosable) emotional disturbance or learning disability requiring intervention (Freiberg, 1991). The widespread use of drugs and recent figures showing that in one year over *a million young people attempted suicide, with more than 250,000 requiring medical treatment* (Cimons, 1991) are further indications of the high incidence of neglect and destructive parenting practices.

selves are "bad" as a survival mechanism rather than face the painful truth of their experience. This defense is generalized and becomes a social institution.

Unfortunately, in supporting the sanctity of the nuclear family and in protecting parents' rights over their children, society indirectly condones the harm done to children "for their own good."[6] Furthermore, many professionals and experts in child development have moved in the direction of de-emphasizing or even negating the important link between early childhood trauma and subsequent maladaptive behavior in adult patients (Plomin, 1989; Rosenfeld, 1978). This trend has contributed to the atmosphere of doubt and controversy surrounding the validity of adults' recollections of being sexually and physically abused as children.[7]

Years of clinical experience with patients and their families convinced me of certain unavoidable and painful truths about family life and its adverse effect on both children and parents (Firestone, 1990). Originally, my attention was directed toward schizophrenic families, later toward families that produced neuroses, and lastly I began to investigate the effects of the structure of the nuclear family on "normal" individuals. My abiding interest was an attempt to understand the causes of personal suffering, limitation, and maladjustment. In the course of this effort to fathom the meaning of symptoms and pain and determine the underlying causality, I had to gradually relinquish my own inclination to idealize the family. I was forced to look at destructive parental attitudes and responses that were detrimental to people's well-being. I discovered that the origins of self-defeating behavior and a good deal of personal misery were directly traceable to harmful operations within the traditional family structure (Firestone, 1988).

My position, however, is not that the nuclear family is inherently detrimental to human growth and development, but that it has evolved into a destructive institution. Only by recognizing this fact and dealing with the issues that make families dysfunctional can we modify or change family life so that it has a more constructive effect on future generations of children.

Lastly, my description and account of abusive family practices should not be mistaken for a disrespect of family values, as they are most cherished by me in my personal life with my wife and [illegible]ght children. My approach, while accounting for [illegible] understanding the roots of psychopathology, is very different from focusing blame on parents and families. Parents themselves were damaged in *their* upbringing and inadvertently pass on this damage to their children. In either case, both parent and child should be viewed with compassion.

The purpose of this article is to (1) draw attention to the fact of emotional child abuse and its manifestations and effects ("normal" parenting practices that cause so much *unnecessary* suffering to children); (2) develop a supportive thesis to reinforce the fact that child abuse as described by adults in psychotherapy and recent reports to the media is a valid phenomenon; (3) detail the varied patterns of emotional abuse; and (4) explain the underlying dynamics—the reasons why well-meaning parents act out destructive machinations.

SUPPORTIVE EVIDENCE OF THE REALITY OF CHILD ABUSE

OBSERVATIONS OF FAMILY INTERACTIONS

In observing and investigating families in public settings, patients in psychotherapy, and the long-term effects of family life in a longitudinal study,[8] we found that, in general, parental responses were not

6 Other cultures do not necessarily conform to Western conventions regarding the sanctity of the family versus protecting the rights of children. See Norma Feshbach's (1980) chapter "Corporal Punishment in the Schools: Some Paradoxes, Some Facts, Some Possible Directions" and Jill Korbin's (1981) "Very Few Cases: Child Abuse and Neglect in the People's Republic of China," for documentation of legal and ethical standards in Sweden and Communist China that support children's rights. Straus & Gelles (1986) reported that spanking, slapping, and hitting a child with an object are legally considered "abuse" in Sweden and several other countries (p. 468).

7 The most convincing evidence in opposition to those who claim that these memories are merely fantasies or distortions has come from parents in psychotherapy or group process who openly admitted the abuses they inflicted on their children. Their self-disclosures validated and often added to the accounts of their adult children's recollections of being mistreated while growing up. Participants in a specialized parenting group have observed the transmission of abusive attitudes and behaviors through three generations, beginning with their parents, perpetuated through themselves, and subsequently directed toward their offspring (Firestone, 1989).

consistent with a reasonable or responsible operational definition of love.

Loving operations would include genuine warmth, tenderness, physical affection, pleasure in the child's company, respect for the child's boundaries, responsible and sensitive care, and a willingness to be a real person with the child rather than simply act the role of "mother" or "father." When parental actions contradict these criteria and are disrespectful, overprotective, intrusive, neglectful, or overtly hostile, they cannot be considered to be loving operations, regardless of the subjective inner feeling described by parents. Parents' behaviors must coincide with their internal feeling state in order for their love to have a beneficial effect on the child. The discrepancy between the inner feeling of love and loving behavior is one of the reasons why parents are defensive; they know what they feel, but they lack the same clarity in relation to their behavior.

We observed two major categories of mistreatment of children. One is best characterized as aggression; the other as neglect. Aggression refers to degradation, physical or sexual mistreatment, verbal abuse, a lack of respect for the child's boundaries, etc., whereas neglect refers to deprivation and insensitivity to the child's needs and a lack of physical affection, interest, and concern.

It is interesting that in a deep feeling release psychotherapy, patients in the former instance shouted statements such as: "Get away from me!" "I'm scared of you!" "I'm not crazy!" "Leave me alone!"; whereas in relation to neglect, they screamed: "Hold me!" "Touch me!" "You don't see me!" "Look at me!" "You don't love me!" "Don't go away!" "Don't leave me!" Needless to say, these expressions were accompanied by intense affect.

DYSFUNCTIONAL ADULTS AND DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILIES

The majority of individuals in our culture are damaged in their personal relationships, self-confidence, and overall sense of self. Their attitudes are contaminated by feelings of self-hatred and voice attacks concerning performance. These negative feelings also impact on individuals' capacity to function in the work place. For example, fear or rage toward authority, withholding, and other forms of passive-aggression are indicators of early trauma.

The effects of child abuse are evident in the statistics related to dysfunctional adults, the increase in the divorce rate, and the breakdown of the family. Surveys show that the *lifetime* prevalence for depression is 20.4% of the population; for *any* DSM-III-R disorder, it is 37.1% (Lewinsohn, 1991). The 1973-1988 General Social Surveys conducted by the National Opinion Research Center show that nearly one-half (45.6%) of persons "ever married" were separated or divorced after 15 to 19 years of marriage (McLanahan & Booth, 1989). Hewlett (1991) reports that 42% of fathers "fail to see their children in the wake of divorce" (p. 12), and Goodrich, Rampage, and Ellman (1989) estimate that "by 1990 one-half of all our children under 18 will spend three to five years living in a single-mother family" (p. 56). Bolton and MacEachron (1986) have documented the indications of maltreatment risk in the divorced single-parent family. Finally, Toth (1992) reports that "the last major study, conducted by the department [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services] about a decade ago, estimated that 1 million youths run away from home each year" (p. A5). A more recent study by the National Association of Social workers found that "two-thirds of the runaways who seek shelter have been physically or sexually abused by a parent" (p. A5).

Most people rely on shop-worn solutions centered on blaming social upheaval and personal suffering on the breakdown of religion and the dissolution of the family; however, the reverse is true. The deterioration in family relationships and social structure is largely a by-product of harmful practices within the family unit, rather than the result (deMause, 1974; Miller 1980/1984).

A very important indication of child abuse is the subsequent damage to adults in the quality of their *interpersonal relationships*. Most people's personal interactions are characterized by a general distrust of others, fear of involvement and vulnerability, a toughness or hardness of men and women in relation to each other, and a good deal of generalized hostility.

8 The reference population involved in the longitudinal study is described in a book, *Compassionate Child-Rearing* (Firestone, 1989). The study refers to the observation of approximately 100 adult individuals over a 14-year period in their interactions with their parents and with their children.

It is logical that distress and unhappiness in adult relationships are a direct consequence of painful experiences in people's early associations. Distrustful attitudes and fear experienced in family relationships are later extended to others.

ADVERSE REACTIONS TO PARENTAL CONTACTS

Reactions of Disturbed Patients

Regression in schizophrenic and psychosomatic patients following parents' hospital visits is an important indication of negative parental influences. At the National Jewish Center for Immunology and Respiratory Medicine, we observed the impact of separation from parents on young patients suffering from intractable asthma, whose symptoms considerably improved or virtually disappeared entirely during a two-year separation period or "parentectomy." This change was not due to geographic relocation, as some of the improved children came from the same region.[9] In addition there was increased symptomatology following parental visits.

In regard to schizophrenia, many therapists spend months with patients leading to a small amount of progress, only to have this progress reversed in a matter of an hour or two in the course of a seemingly harmless visit with the family. This is a common experience in residential treatment centers and mental hospitals (Lidz, 1969/1972).

Reactions of Children

Many children appear more agitated, tense, and antisocial in the company of their parents as contrasted with being with other children and adults. This is particularly true of young children. In addition, we often noted that there was a lack of eye contact and regression to more infantile behaviors in children after they spent extended periods of time with parents.

Our observations are supported by other studies, including the work of Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham (1944), who described the reactions of children separated from their parents in wartime England. In their book, *Infants Without Families*, they state that children in the Hampstead Residential Nursery frequently reverted to infantile behaviors following family reunions or holidays with their parents.

Educators aware of the damaging effects of parent-child interactions tend to adjust their classes accordingly. For example, instructors teaching skiing, swimming, and other sports frequently make it a prerequisite that parents not accompany even very young children to class or practice.

Reactions of Adults

It appeared that negative attitudes toward self were reinforced by parental contacts, and people reported a deterioration in mood and an increase in tension and marital disputes after family visits. One common occurrence involved the situation where the new mother's mother arrived to help out with the neonate. Very often the situation deteriorated. Instead of having a positive effect, it contributed to the problem of caring for the new baby and led to increased tension in the home.Generalized hostility toward in-laws is evidenced in the humor directed at in-laws and particularly at mothers-in-law. This anger is related to negative or unpleasant changes in the husband or wife when associating with their families.

It is interesting that grown children's attitudes toward parents reflect a good deal of conscious and unconscious hostility and a desire for distance. Parents constantly complain that their children don't write or visit. Why, if family life is so constructive and personally rewarding, must grown children be coerced or be made to feel guilty to maintain contact? Why wouldn't it be a powerful choice for them to maintain close relationships with their parents over the span of life?

FINDINGS FROM INVESTIGATIONS UTILIZING VOICE THERAPY

Further evidence of the validity of child abuse can be seen in abusive attitudes and inner voices that people direct toward themselves. We were able to

9 Reporting on this form of residential treatment, Seiden (1965) stated: "During their two-year stay, their health improves so rapidly and significantly that hospitalization [referring to the above-mentioned treatment program] is often considered a life-saving experience.... Ruling out improvements in specific medical or psychological care, workers in this field have concluded that *separation itself is the key factor in improvement*" [italics added] (p. 27).

bring these attitudes to the surface, utilizing the specialized techniques of Voice Therapy (Firestone, 1988, 1990). Self-critical, self-attacking thoughts and attitudes exist to varying degrees in every person, undermining self-confidence and influencing maladaptive behavior. Without any encouragement or prior suggestion, participants in our study directly related the tone, style of communication, and content of their self-attacks and voices to experiences in early family interactions. People remembered personal attacks leveled against them and recalled examples of abusive attitudes and behavior they had endured.

FINALLY, AND MOST CONCLUSIVELY, PARENTS' ADMISSION, IN PARENTING GROUPS AND IN INDIVIDUAL PSYCHOTHERAPY, OF ABUSIVE FEELINGS AND ACTIONS

In our reference population, we found that (a) parents' admission of abusive treatment of their children coincided with reports of their grown children, and (b) abuses were closely related to their children's personal limitations and later suffering. If their grown children's reports were fabricated or were merely fantasies, parents' disclosures would have failed to confirm them.

Within the forum of ongoing parenting groups, parents revealed aggressive attitudes, feelings, and behaviors they had acted out at significant times in interactions with their children. In many cases, they added information or furnished more details surrounding the painful events recalled by their offspring. In this atmosphere of honest disclosure, parents' guilt feelings were not intensified; on the contrary, they were significantly reduced. (There has been a strong defensive reaction and movement against exposure of parental abuses in recent years, based on the fact that this exposure would increase parental guilt feelings and further complicate the problem. Although there is some truth to this accusation, we have also found evidence to the contrary: (a) when these incidents come to light in a therapeutic atmosphere of warmth and understanding, guilt feelings are reduced, and (b) even if exposure did lead to guilt, education is necessary for remediation or reform.) In general, only when parents become really free in their communication, admit their negative feelings, and understand the origin of their aggression toward their children, can they constructively modify their behavior (Firestone, 1990; Fraiberg, Adelson, & Shapiro, 1975/1980).

PATTERNS OF EMOTIONAL CHILD ABUSE

It would be valuable to direct attention to specific forms of abuse that have lasting effects on the personalities of children. The following patterns of emotional or psychological abuse may be delineated: those based on (a) parental hostility; (b) parental indifference or neglect; (c) a generalized ignorance or misunderstanding of children; (d) overly-restrictive or harsh moral codes and value systems; and (e) parents' negative character traits and defended life-styles. These patterns are identified with and imitated by children, to their own detriment.

BEHAVIORS BASED ON PARENTAL HOSTILITY

Verbal Abuse

Parental hostility is often communicated to a child through sarcastic, derisive, or condescending commentary. Parents are verbally aggressive when their spoken words are typically characterized as negative, overly critical or severe. Constant derogatory statements directed toward children about their basic appearance, performance, and mannerisms are very debilitating. In addition, many parents repeatedly make unfavorable comparisons with siblings or peers. Children have no way to combat parents who maliciously tease them or humiliate them. Their feelings of embarrassment and shame generally are ignored, discounted, or even laughed at. Insinuations and sneering questions like "Can't you take a joke?" or "Why are you so sensitive?" intensify children's hurt feelings and sense of shame.

Often children are ridiculed in situations where they are particularly vulnerable. Many are teased, criticized, or put off when they express spontaneous affection. Parents remind them that "You're too old for such things," or taunt them with such statements as "Isn't she the sexy one?" or "Isn't he cute?" For example, many women in our study recalled being rejected or pushed away by their fathers while being physically affectionate. (Many men and women find it awkward and uncomfortable to be affectionate toward children of the opposite sex, because they are afraid of their sexual feelings.) Others remembered responding affectionately to their fathers only to be ridiculed or reprimanded sharply by their mothers

warning them that "nice girls don't act like that." Both men and women remembered parents and relatives making derisive, belittling remarks about their friendships or romantic feelings.

Condescending attitudes are also manifested by many parents, teachers, and nurses who characteristically treat children as inferiors and talk down to them: "Now it's time to take 'our' bath," or "How are 'we' doing?". Lecturing and moral lessons by parents delivered in a pedantic, syrupy, or disrespectful style infantilize children and increase their feelings of incompetency and helplessness.

Parents' tendencies to classify children are comparable to clinicians' overreliance on diagnostic labeling, which dehumanizes and detracts from an overall view of the person. Harsh, judgmental attitudes, expressed through *labeling, categorizing, and name-calling, undermine children's self-esteem.* Parents tend to categorize a particular child as "the shy one," "the beautiful one," "the plain one," or "the defiant one," and refer to children in pejorative terms, telling them that they are "lazy," "inconsiderate," or "selfish." Name-calling or addressing a child with a nickname that has a strong negative connotation robs him/her of dignity and a positive sense of identity.

Sadistic Mistreatment During Socialization of the Child

Mistreatment of children during the socialization process can range from minor irritability and disrespect to sadism and brutality. Many parents believe that children must be made to submit to parental authority ("for their own good") in order to be properly socialized. They feel justified in angrily punishing the child when he/she refuses to comply immediately with their directives or demands. In direct confrontation or showdown with the child, they manifest fierce, punitive attitudes and, at times, violent rage, which stands out from their usual behavior. Explosive outbursts intimidate and terrify children, who perceive their parents as out of control. This type of parental response is weak and ineffectual and threatens the child's security. Situations that require parental authority often provide an outlet for parents' repressed hostility or sadistic tendencies. It is unnecessary to focus on a "battle of wills" where total submission or subversion of self is required of the child.

To compound the problem, many parents equate discipline with punishment and feel righteous in using forceful measures. This faulty approach to discipline tends to be supported legally in our society.[10] Even in the absence of physical force, psychological coercion, thought control, and sadistic threats of future punishment constitute a serious misuse of parental power. In one case, for example, a mother threatened her young daughter several times a day with such statements as: "I'd like to break your neck, you little creep!"

Another form of indirect hostility toward the child is manifest in parental withholding, where parents hold back rewards or inhibit positive emotional responses to children. This turns out to be a very common pattern. Frequently, there are sadistic tendencies underlying a parent's negativity or withholding behavior. For example, parents tend to withhold from their children particularly at those times when they are the most wanting and enthusiastic. They seem to take a kind of sadistic delight in saying "No," even though they may later give in and grant the child's request. As a consequence, many children are discouraged from asking directly for what they want and eventually turn against their wants and priorities. As a result, it is difficult for the majority of adults in our culture to directly ask for what they want and to openly express their feelings about important and meaningful personal issues.

In many cases, acts of cruelty or negative treatment of children may appear to go unnoticed as a part of normal child-rearing practices. Some mothers always manage to get soap in their child's eyes when bathing them, and some fathers think nothing of throwing a terrified youngster into a pool, rationalizing their behavior as an benevolent attempt to help the child conquer his/her fear. There are many exam-

10 Garbarino and Gilliam (1980) state that: "There is clear legal sanction for the use of physical force against children. The Texas legislature, for example, in 1974 enacted legislation containing the following statement: 'The use of force, but not deadly force, against a child younger than 18 years is justified: (1) if the actor is the child's parent or stepparent... (2) when and to the degree the actor believes the force is necessary to discipline the child.' This law reflects the historical role of violence in our civilization" (p. 32). The Supreme Court (in Ingraham v. Wright) ruled that schools have the right to corporally punish disobedient children (Belsky, 1980).

ples of indirect hostility manifested in subtle behaviors; for example, the way a child is handled, dressed, fed, changed, and bathed can be rough and insensitive.

Lack of Respect for the Child's Personal Boundaries

Parents who believe that their children "belong" to them, in the proprietary sense, tend to speak *for* their children, take over their productions as their own, brag excessively to their friends about their accomplishments, and, in general, live vicariously through them. Many parents who are unable to feel for their children offer them flattery and special praise as a substitute for the affection and love they withhold. This type of build-up contributes to irrational feelings of vanity in the child and leads to performance anxiety. It fails to counteract or diminish children's basic feelings of inferiority or unlovability.

Also, parents intrude on the personal boundaries of their offspring by inappropriately touching them, invading their privacy, going through their belongings, reading their mail, and requiring them to perform for friends and relatives. A very serious violation of a child's rights is manifested in parents' insistence that their child reveal his/her innermost thoughts and feelings. This form of inquisition and demand for immediate response closely resembles procedures used in brain-washing.

Studies have conclusively shown that exploitation of the child as a sexual object constitutes a severe infringement on the child's boundaries, leading to ego fragmentation and later to addictive behavior and dissociative disorders (Cavaiola & Schiff, 1988; Conte, 1988; Coons, 1986). However, one must consider that general disregard for a child's personal boundaries can be equally as harmful; in some cases, the effects are more insidious and pathogenic. Children who are intruded on and utilized for a parent's own narcissistic needs grow up feeling as though they don't belong to themselves but exist only as an object for others.

Threats of Abandonment or Loss of Love

Threats of abandonment or of being sent away (to boarding school, hospital, or jail) are far more common than one might think and frighten children unnecessarily. John Bowlby (1973) reports that threats of this sort are widely used by parents as disciplinary measures and frequently lead to serious school phobias, psychosomatic illness, and other symptoms in children.

Warnings or threats that a parent might leave or desert the family, run away and abandon the child, or commit suicide are even more terrifying and, in addition, impose an enormous burden of guilt on the child.

Stifling or Punishing a Child's Aliveness, Spontaneity, and Curiosity

The spontaneous action, liveliness, noise, and lack of shame typical of young children often arouse feelings of tension, embarrassment, guilt, and anger in many parents, who then feel compelled to control and restrict their children. Statements such as "What are you getting so excited for?" "Stop asking so many questions!" suppress children's natural expressions of enthusiasm, curiosity, and freedom of movement. Children are also cautioned: "Don't be so proud of yourself!" "Don't be conceited." They eventually stop taking pride in their accomplishments and have difficulty acknowledging their self-worth.

DESTRUCTIVE PRACTICES BASED ON INDIFFERENCE AND NEGLECT

Deprivation, Actual Neglect, and Outright Rejection

Neglect is a passive form of abuse. According to Garbarino and Gilliam (1980), "Most estimates figure the rate of neglect at three to four times the rate for physical abuse, and it probably accounts for more deaths" (p. 14).[11] Many so-called accidental drownings of infants and younger children and some incidents of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) are

11 Most injuries in children aren't caused by random fate, but are predictable and preventable. Injuries are now the leading killer of children, causing more deaths than all diseases combined. "In 1988, unintentional injuries (car accidents, drownings, mishaps) and intentional injuries (homicide, suicide, child abuse) took the lives of 22,426 children, leaving an additional 30,000 with permanent disabilities" (Sullivan, 1991, p. B7). This form of neglect is partially responsible for the fact that homicide is among the five leading causes of death for children in the United States (Seiden, 1984; Korbin, 1989).

attributable to parental neglect (Jason, Carpenter, & Tyler, 1983; Luke, 1978; Newlands & Emery, 1991; Rheingold, 1964; Rosen & Johnson, 1988). Some parents fail to take even the minimum precautions in relation to a child's physical health and safety. The author is aware of cases where neglect led to death, e.g., children left unattended in bathtubs or swimming pools. Other parents refused medical treatment for a sick child because of religious beliefs, and the resulting neglect caused unnecessary deaths.[12] Children who are not provided with the necessary supervision, who are not watched carefully, are involved in more accidents and sustain more injuries, burns, broken bones, etc., than other children. Later, as adolescents and adults, they tend to be more accident-prone and self-destructive.[13]

Similarly, children raised by "psychologically unavailable" parents often exhibit symptoms of "nonorganic failure to thrive" such as apathy, lethargy, developmental delays (Altemeier, et al., 1979; Drotar, 1985; Drotar, Eckerle, Satola, Pallotta, & Wyatt, 1990; Kotelchuck, 1980; Newberger, Reed, Daniel, Hyde, & Kotelchuck, 1977; Pollitt, Eichler, & Chan, 1975), and a phenomenon known as "deprivation dwarfism" (Gardner, 1972; Pollitt, Gilmore, & Valcarcel, 1978).[14] Emotional neglect is manifested in parents who reject or ignore their children, refuse to speak to them for extended time periods, or are unconcerned with their whereabouts. Emotionally neglected children tend to take on a rejected, pathetic appearance. Their unappealing demeanor, combined with clinging, dependent, or negativistic behaviors, provoke rejection by others, thereby diminishing any chance for corrective experiences.

Lack of Physical Affection, Interest, or Concern

Parents who have been deprived of love during *their* formative years often lack the emotional resources to offer love and affection to a needy child. They feel frightened and inadequate in bearing responsibility for a life other than their own. The pressure of the added dependency load can be very threatening (Bakan, 1971; Steele & Pollock, 1974). Therefore, they fail to respond warmly to a child, rationalizing their lack of response as an attempt to avoid spoiling the child by giving him/her "too much" affection or attention.

Other parents reassure their offspring with such statements as: "Your father really loves you, he just doesn't know how to show it." They assume that their inner thoughts and feelings *about* loving their children are comparable with outward expressions. They imagine that they care deeply, while in fact, they make very little real meaningful contact with their children.[15] When there is no outward expression of physical warmth, children tend to feel unacceptable or unlovable. On the other hand, the type of intrusive touching and nervous caressing manifested by an emotionally hungry parent attempting to fill his/her dependency needs through the child must be distinguished from genuine physical affection that nurtures the child.

As their children grow older, disinterested parents often remain ignorant, indifferent to and unaware of their children's lives and emotional well-being. An insidious, disguised example of neglect can be observed in parents who have excellent standards of physical care (their offspring are meticulously cared for, clean, and well-groomed), yet they remain emotionally cold, unfeeling, and distant toward them. Children who are handled insensitively by people

12 Recent supreme court decisions (the Indiana Supreme Court), revoking the "religious defense" argument in the deaths of two children, may help prevent some future deaths from this form of neglect (Hughes, 1990).

13 Margolin and Teicher (1968) found a history of maternal deprivation during the first year of life in a group of *suicidal* adolescent boys. Schneer, Kay, and Brozovsky (1961) found parental loss or separation experiences among 84 suicidal adolescents; this was accompanied by a large number of instances of neglect by the mother. Israel Orbach (1988), author of *Children Who Don't Want to Live*, in summarizing the research on neglect stated: "Neglect appears to amplify the destructive impact of abuse. The parents' apathy creates a feeling of superfluity in the child. At the most simple and direct level, the child learns that [he/]she is an unwanted burden" (p. 93).

14 During infancy and early childhood, *emotional* deprivation and neglect can lead to death. Spitz's (1945, 1946a, 1946b) studies of children raised in an institution, deprived of maternal involvement, showed an infant mortality rate of *over 33%* in a sample of ninety-one orphans, who were "adequately cared for in every bodily respect" (Spitz, 1965, p. 278).

15 It is shocking how infrequently "normal" parents make meaningful contact with their children. A survey (Szalai, 1972) found that the average parent spends only 5.4 minutes per day talking with his/her child.

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who lack warmth grow up with much unhappiness and an exaggerated hunger and desperation for love. Ironically, this desperation limits their possibility of ever attaining love in future relationships.

Lack of Sensitivity to a Child's Needs

Parents who have closed off aspects of their own personalities and are cut off from their feelings are necessarily insensitive to the needs of their children. Some mothers, for example, are incapable of feeding and caring for an infant without arousing undue anxiety or frustration in the child. They are inappropriate in the scheduling of feedings, often delay their responses to their child's cries of hunger or distress, and at times overfeed or force-feed the child. Indeed, many fathers and mothers appear unable to empathetically attune their care-taking responses to the child's signals and behavioral cues (Brazelton & Cramer, 1990; Stern, 1985).

Excessive Permissiveness

Overpermissiveness is a form of neglect because the child fails to develop appropriate inner controls over acting-out behavior. Overly permissive parents are remiss in failing to provide sufficient direction and control for their offspring. If children are not properly socialized, in the best sense of the word (for example, if they fail to learn to control their aggressive impulses), they will become anxious as adults because of their inability to manage their emotions and impulses. As a result, they develop considerable self-hatred and negative attitudes toward self. Indeed, when children fail to receive either affection or regulation, both of which are basic needs,[16] they grow up feeling unloved and unlovable.

Parental Inconsistency

Parental inconsistency is often more damaging than consistent ill treatment, which is more readily identifiable. It sets up a pattern of anxiety and distrust. Parents tend to respond to the child more in terms of their own moods (which vary considerably), rather than reacting appropriately to the child's behavior (Loeber & Dishion, 1983). Often, outbursts of anger and abuse are followed by feelings of contrition and apologetic behavior. One particularly destructive pattern of inconsistency is exemplified by parents who punish their children or become especially withholding from them following close personal interaction. This vacillating pattern confuses the child and leads to a defensive process of inwardness and emotional tightness.

BEHAVIORS BASED ON GENERALIZED IGNORANCE

Parental Role-Playing and Dishonesty

It is always detrimental for parents to role-play (act out "proper" responses) or respond in a manner or style different from their true feeling state. The majority of child-rearing books support a form of abuse characterized by mixed messages, a discrepancy between spoken words and real feelings that distorts the child's sense of reality (Bateson, Jackson, Haley, & Weakland, 1956/1972; Laing, 1967; Ruesch & Bateson, 1951). Children suffer from the lack of a real person in their lives. What they need most is a parent who is an emotionally responsive human being, willing to relate to them directly with genuine feeling, not a robot reacting with programmed, socially acceptable, or role-determined emotions.[17]

Parental Overprotection

Overprotective behavior limits a child's experience and ability to cope with life and teaches him/her an abnormal form of dependency. Parents who lack an understanding of children's need to grow and individuate tend to restrict their freedom of movement, discourage or even prevent their independent interests and pursuits, or become overly concerned with their physical health. In overidentifying with their child's pain, they soothe, reassure, coddle, or oversympathize, which limits his/her development of ego strength and independence. There appear to be two factors underlying overprotective tendencies in parents: a benevolent, albeit inappropriate and de-

16 In order to provide children with emotional sustenance, parents must have both the desire and the capacity to care for the child. The author has termed this psychonutritional product "love-food," which implies parents' desire and ability to meet the child's basic needs for both love and control (Firestone, 1957).

17 Filmed material elaborating on children's basic needs can be found in a series of documentaries on child-rearing: *The Inner Voice in Child Abuse* (Parr, 1986); *Hunger versus Love* (Parr, 1987a); *Parental Ambivalence* (Parr, 1987b); *Therapeutic Child-Rearing* (Parr, 1987c); and *The Implicit Pain of Sensitive Child-Rearing* (Parr, 1988).

structive, need to spare the child pain, and disguised hostility or aggression toward the child (Levy, 1943; Parker, 1983).

Isolation

Isolating children and adolescents from social contacts, including peers or extra-familial influences that would offer a different point of view from that of the parents, is detrimental to a child's personal development and future mental health.[18] Many parents, assuming that children are easily influenced (adversely) by "outsiders" strictly limit their child's or adolescent's contact with other people. Physically abusive parents, in particular, attempt to prevent their offspring from forming other relationships that could possibly facilitate a healing process for the trauma they suffer (Young, 1964). With respect to prevention, the importance of an extended family situation or support network cannot be overemphasized.[19]

OVERLY RESTRICTIVE OR HARSH MORAL CODES AND VALUES

Teaching Attitudes Toward Sex and the Human Body

Virtually every adult in our society grew up in families where they were taught distorted views about sex. As parents, they indicate, both directly and subtly, that sex is bad, that masturbation is harmful, that the subject of sexuality is taboo, and that sex should be confined to a separate sphere of life (Berke, 1988; Calderone, 1974/1977). In spite of the so-called sexual revolution of the sixties, many still refuse to allow their teenagers to attend sex education classes. In addition, negative views held by parents in relation to nudity and the human body cause children to develop a deep sense of shame about their bodies and guilt in relation to sexual feelings (Gunderson & McCary, 1979). The typical introduction to sexuality (implicit attitudes and training) encountered in family life actually constitutes a form of sexual abuse, as the majority of adults in our society are eventually impaired to varying degrees in their sexual feelings, attitudes, and capacity to enjoy mature sexual relationships (Pagels, 1988; Parr, 1990; Vergote, 1978/1988).

Parental Attitudes Based on Teachings that the Child Is Inherently Bad

Closely related to distorted views of sexuality are parental beliefs derived from the concept of "original sin," that is, the belief that children are born bad (Klein, 1948/1964; Wilson & Herrnstein, 1985). Statements and cliches such as "Children should be seen and not heard," "Spare the rod and spoil the child" are representative of this point of view. Moralistic and restrictive training procedures, based on perceiving the child's nature as inherently sinful, bad, or basically evil produce children who perceive themselves as bad and behave accordingly. For example, it is destructive to teach children that certain thoughts or feelings, such as anger, envy, or competitiveness, are unacceptable. Children need to learn that any thought or feeling is acceptable; on the other hand, they must learn to evaluate and control their behavior. Actions must come under scrutiny and relate to a value system because they have external consequences, whereas freedom of thought and feeling are necessary for children to understand themselves and come up with creative solutions.

PARENTS' NEGATIVE CHARACTER TRAITS AND DEFENDED LIFE-STYLES ARE IDENTIFIED WITH AND IMITATED BY CHILDREN TO THEIR OWN DETRIMENT

As role models, parents exhibit many toxic personality traits, behaviors, and life-styles that are passed on to succeeding generations (Baer & Sherman, 1964; Baer, Peterson, & Sherman, 1967; Bandura & Walters, 1963; Main & George, 1985).

(1) **Addictive parents transmit their addictive behaviors and life-styles to their children.** In studying the relationship of substance abuse and other addictions, it is important to note the intergenera-

18 Joseph Richman (1986) describes the destructiveness of a closed family system in which the child "is alienated and isolated both outside the family and within it. It is that combination that often produces the particular pattern that is fundamental to a suicidal resolution" (p. 133).

19 Recent studies have shown that certain resilient children who experienced severe abuse and neglect, yet who developed few symptoms as adults, usually had a significant other—a relative, family friend, or teacher—who took an interest in them and provided them with support (Cohler, 1987).

tional cycle of these negative patterns.[20] In spite of parents' attempting to influence their children otherwise, children imitate parents' defenses.

(2) **Children incorporate and imitate parents' maladaptive approaches to life.** For example, parents who are suspicious and paranoid will pass on to their offspring a paranoid orientation to life. Parents' prejudices toward women or men or people of other races or religions, and other ideas that predispose alienation, are taken on by children as part of their belief system. These negative attitudes, whether racist, ethnic, or sexist, cause distrust among people and support an isolated self-protective posture that leads to problems in the child's later relationships.

(3) **Children imitate their parents' self-denying posture and assimilate their belief that personal wants are "selfish" or undesirable.** The result is that most children progressively turn their backs on their wants and priorities, which is tantamount to surrendering a basic part of their identity.

(4) **Children learn to be dishonest by observing and imitating their parents' dishonesty.** Paradoxically, parents who wish their children to develop into moral, honest adults often lack personal integrity, engage in corrupt business practices, or are deceptive in their own relationships. The dishonesty and double messages inherent in most couple relationships, where partners' actions contradict their words, also distort a child's sense of reality.

(5) **Finally, children learn to suppress "unacceptable feelings" of anger and fear imitative of parents' repression and denial.** Because of this, parents not only damage their children, but also unknowingly prevent their recovery. In order to recover from initial trauma, it is very important to be outward and open about one's feelings. Not permitting children to cry, express anger, or talk about their feelings perpetuates the misery and suffering (Lewis & Michalson, 1984).[21]

REASONS PARENTS DAMAGE THEIR CHILDREN

Many theorists (Fontana, 1983; Garbarino & Gilliam, 1980; Kempe & Kempe, 1984; Laing, 1969/1972; Miller, 1980/1984; Rohner, 1986; Shengold, 1989; and others) have dealt with the issue of child abuse and described its manifestations. While it is necessary and important to deal with child maltreatment on a phenomenological level, it is not sufficient to merely point out the problem and document its extent and pervasiveness. It is most important to understand the psychodynamics involved in the intergenerational cycle of child abuse (Firestone, 1988, 1990). Emotional damage to children is multidetermined (Belsky, 1980) and no single pattern is explanatory. However, there are many important factors that bear on this issue:

A. Parents have a fundamental ambivalence toward themselves and their children. They both love and hate themselves, and naturally extend both feelings to their offspring. Most parents admit their nurturing tendencies, but suppress or deny their negative feelings or aggression.

B. Parents tend to utilize their child to dispose of their self-hatred and the traits they dislike in themselves by projecting them onto the child (Bowen, 1978; Brazelton & Cramer, 1990; Firestone, 1990; Kerr & Bowen, 1989). In the process of projection, the child is basically used as a waste receptacle or dumping ground. Parents' negative attitudes, unconscious hostility, and covert malice are incorporated by the child in the form of self-attacking thoughts or voices.

C. Most parents are unable to sustain consistent loving relationships with their children because the aliveness, spontaneity, and spirit of the child threaten parents' psychological defenses. Feeling deeply for the child revives painful primal feelings from parents' own childhoods that were previously repressed. Moreover, close, personal contact with their children reminds parents of the preciousness and fragility of life and tends to precipitate fears of potential loss.

20 Studies show that there are at least 22 million adults in this country who have lived with an alcoholic parent (Seixas & Youcha, 1985). The National Council on Alcoholism estimates that 3 million teenagers continue to be problem drinkers (MacDonald, 1987). Claudia Black (1981) reports that "fifty to sixty percent of all alcoholics (a low estimate) have, or had, at least one alcoholic parent. Alcoholism is a generational disease" (p. 4).

21 Wolfe (1987) underscores the importance of the emotional concomitants of physical or sexual abuse in adult individuals, which are frequently absent or implicitly contained in discussions of the impact of abuse on the child.

D. Parents mistake powerful feelings of desperation and emotional hunger for genuine love and concern for their children. Immature parents tend to make demands for love, fulfillment, reassurance, and even parenting *from* their children, rather than offering affection and love *to* them.[22] The child growing up in this situation is drained by physical contact with the emotionally hungry parent. Parents tend to compensate for the damage they sense they are causing, very often by choosing to spend more time with their child. However, increased contact with a hungry, immature parent increases the damage to the child. In addition, an infantile adult acting parental not only increases children's insecurity, but also confuses them in their sense of reality (Firestone, 1990).

E. The nature of traditional coupling fosters dependence and exclusivity in the parents' relationship that has a detrimental effect on the child. In forming a fantasy bond, each partner has been diminished in his/her vitality, individuality, and sense of self through the utilization of the other for purposes of security. Parents in this situation have very little energy to offer affection or direction to their children.

F. One interesting existential issue often overlooked is that most parents have children for the wrong reason—as a defense against death anxiety, a bid for immortality. Parents imagine, on some level, that the child is an extension of themselves, and this "belonging" or merger imbues them with immortality. However, this defense "works" only to the extent that the child is essentially the *same* as the parents in appearance, personality traits, behaviors, and defenses. The more the child is *different* from the parents, the more he/she poses a threat to their illusion of immortality. Therefore, nonconformity and individuation are judged or perceived as "bad," while sameness with, or submission to, one's parents is seen as good.

G. In utilizing the child as a symbol of immortality, parents feel both the need and the obligation to impose their own standards, beliefs, and value systems on their children. They transmit their beliefs and values (and defenses) to children *both implicitly and explicitly*, that is, by example and direct instruction. Having been "processed" in this manner, most children grow up feeling alienated from themselves and feel that they have no inherent right to their own point of view as separate human beings.

CONCLUSION

In summarizing, we have shown that emotional abuse of children is widespread and has lasting effects. Apologists, or those who de-emphasize parental influences, tend to base their explanations regarding the etiology of psychological disturbance on biological or hereditary factors. However, as stated previously, I feel that the damage to children is overdetermined by environmental factors—actual abuses that injure the child's psyche. People who subscribe to the former explanation rely heavily on the concept of temperamental differences, which detracts from the significance of parents' impact on a child and lessens their accountability for responsible child-rearing practices. However, even temperamental differences can be modified in a healthy environment.

While it is true that increasing parental awareness can foster guilt reactions, nevertheless, when awareness is carried to a more complete understanding of the cycle, parents' guilt is actually diminished. Indeed, the dual focus of our specialized parenting groups on: (1) parents' negative attitudes and behavior toward their children, and (2) the negative experiences parents went through in their own childhoods, help mothers and fathers to have more compassion for themselves (Firestone, 1990).[23] Regaining feeling for themselves was the key element in the therapeutic process that enabled them to alter their child-rearing practices in a positive direction.

In terms of preventive mental hygiene, it is vital to recognize the core issues involved in breaking the chain of emotional child abuse and to intervene, whenever possible, in cases where infants and children are experiencing serious emotional problems and psychological disturbance.[24] In order to *really* help future generations of children, we must try to over-

22 The author's distinction between emotional hunger and love, two very different parental emotional states and behavior, explains the dynamics underlying patterns of anxious attachment as compared to those of secure attachment described by Bowlby (1973,1982) and Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall (1978).

23 Fraiberg, Adelson, & Shapiro (1975/1980) state: "Our hypothesis is that access to childhood pain becomes a powerful deterrent against repetition in parenting, while repression and isolation of painful affect provide the psychological requirements for identification with the betrayers and the aggressors" (p. 195).

come our prejudices, develop an objective view of dynamics in the nuclear family, and critically evaluate dehumanizing child-rearing practices that are an extensive part of our culture.

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24 Gregory Zilboorg (1932), in his 1931 address to the American Orthopsychiatric Association, stated: "I should like to say in conclusion not only that the hostile trends operating in the unconscious of the parents present a universal phenomenon which deserves to awaken the curiosity of the practical psychopathologist, but that they are potent, dynamic factors which we must know in considerable detail if we are to deal with neurotic maladjustment, delinquency, and other related problems in children" (p. 41-42).

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